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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0289
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000774

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PINR EAID KPAO CASC MR

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER BRIEFS AMBASSADOR ON ARRESTS

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 764

1B. NOUAKCHOTT 770

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

(C) Key Points

-- He speaks excellent English, but, surprisingly, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed wanted to brief Ambassador in Arabic on the recent arrests of five high ranking military officers and civilians when Ambassador met with him at the Minister's request on June 21. They were alone.

-- The Minister's choice of language signaled the importance of the recent arrests (reftels) for the Transitional Government. The Foreign Minister prefers Arabic only when the subject is particularly sensitive and important.

-- Sid'Ahmed emphasized that the arrests of the five men were in no way designed to stifle dissent before the coming elections.

-- Meanwhile, a UN Election Assessment Team arrived June 19 for a mid-point evaluation of how Mauritania is doing in its planning for the elections. The team's findings will guide future UN engagement in the transition.

(C) Comments

-- The Arabic the Foreign Minister used to describe the reasons for the arrests was vague, and Ambassador pressed for greater detail. (For example, the Foreign Minister said that those arrested had tried secretly to disrupt (za'za') the referendum, and to confuse (shewweshe) voters.)

-- The Foreign Minister has promised to provide additional detail, if and when he got it. (We doubt we'll get much more from him.)

-- But the Foreign Minister did make one telling point, about the limited, but active opposition to the referendum that existed. Several political parties will boycott the referendum, the media had carried their views, and no action had been taken by the Mauritanian authorities to squelch

dissent. He's right. They haven't.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶11. (C) Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed briefed Ambassador June 21 on the government's recent arrests of high ranking military officers and civilians associated with former President Taya, going over much of the material already covered in reftels.

THE OFFICIAL ACCOUNT

¶12. (C) Sid'Ahmed said the arrests were carried out to stop what he described as the early stages of planning to disrupt the Referendum vote scheduled for June 25. Sid'Ahmed did not divulge specifics of the case, which he said the government was still investigating, but said only five individuals had been arrested, not more as had been rumored.

¶13. (C) Embassy's military and civilian sources have confirmed that five men were arrested, but only four of the five names have been confirmed, including Colonel Sid Mohamed Ould Vaida, Colonel Abderrahmane Ould Lekwar, Mini Ould Lekwar, and Mohamed Ould Mohamed Aly (see ref A for descriptions). Local newspapers have reported the fifth man as Ahmed Ould Saleck, head of the pro-Taya "Democrats without Borders." Embassy sources have also indicated that other men had been temporarily detained and questioned, then released, including General Boukhreiss and his son, and Colonel Chrouf.

¶14. (C) Sid'Ahmed emphasized to the Ambassador that the

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arrests were in no way an attempt to stifle dissent before the coming elections.

¶15. (C) Military sources indicated that military officers will remain restricted to their bases through this Sunday's Referendum.

REFERENDUM MOVES FORWARD

¶16. (C) There are no indications that the arrests will affect this Sunday's Referendum, and Mauritians tell Embassy officials they are prepared to vote. The Embassy plans to continue its observation mission, sending 22 officers and local staff to observe polling stations in the capital Nouakchott, the economic capital Nouadhibou, and the southern cities of Aleg, Bogue and Kaedi.

UN ELECTION ASSESSMENT TEAM ARRIVES

¶17. (C) The UN Election Assessment Team met with Ambassador June 21 to discuss their 10 day assessment mission to Mauritania. Chief of the delegation Valerie De Campos Vello said the team would assess five indicators during its 10 day mission, including competence of the electoral commission, quality of the voter lists, competence of electoral actors, mechanisms for funding electoral campaigns, and mechanisms for the settlement of electoral disputes.

¶18. (C) De Campos said her team would submit its findings to the UN's Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, with recommendations for future UN engagement in the democratic transition process. The UN team will provide a summary of its findings during an out-brief to us scheduled for June 29. LeBaron